

## And After The Battle

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Summary: Around UXM 344345. Joseph watches the Shi'ar celebrate their survival, and thinks.

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The images rise with nightmare intensity, burning their way into my brain, and however much I drink of the alien liquor I cannot blur them in my mind's eye. Genocide, the broken, bloody bodies of the friends and lovers, the parents and children and siblings of the people that dance in front of me, as if they are spitting on the dead. \_We celebrate, for we are alive and you are not.\_ Genocide, the bodies of my parents- his parents? no, mine as well, for all that I can remember no more of them than their deaths- clutching at me, dragging me down into the pit with them. Tossing an endless parade of broken, dead bodies into a furnace to burn.

And before me, the aliens dance. \_We live. They don't.\_

Rogue says, this is unfair of me to think. I make out her form, dancing wildly with a feather-crested man whose name she probably doesn't know, because I will not dance tonight. She says, they honor their dead this way. They remember the lives, not the deaths, and they go on, as the lost ones would wish of them. Perhaps she's right, but I don't understand it. I don't think I can.

I don't remember the lives. All I see is death.

One by one I identify my friends. Hank and Trish are dancing; Hank, at least, has been here before, and knows Shi'ar custom, respects it as I cannot. Bishop is standing in a corner, his usual glowering aspect gone, as he looks out at the gathering with eyes haunted as mine. I almost go to him- there, I think, is a man who understands loss, who can perhaps help me go on past the memories that have started to burn in my brain. But then he turns aside and leaves,

going elsewhere.

I don't see Remy anywhere. Just as well. Tonight I am not interested in platitudes about the value of feeling nothing.

Another drink. The glass is all rounded, fluting curves. The drink tastes strange, with odd spices I don't recognize and the bouquet of an alien world, but it's alcohol and it feels comfortable in my hand. I've been here before, I'm sure of it. Staring into a night filled with the past and the screams of those long dead, with a glass in my hand to try, at least, to anesthetize the pain. Not that it will. I know that too.

Nothing ends the pain but violence.

I remember the rage that erupted from me before, the violence that was all I could see. I drew the energies of this alien world into myself and drugged myself with them, turned my vision berserker white until all I could see were the killers to fall beneath my strength. That drove out the memories, for a time. Or no. The memories were not driven out, but the pain was made bearable, transmuted to rage by the alchemy of power. Righteous rage had me in its thrall, and I became an archangel of war with a sword of lightning, bright and terrible in my fury. Unthinking, feeling nothing but bloodlust toward the genocidal killers.

We were lucky. I almost destroyed the entire plan, almost got myself and the rest of the X-Men killed, and if we had fallen so would have this world. Perhaps there might be a time when righteous bloodlust was of use, but that wasn't it. It didn't matter. It owned me, and even seeing my friends fall before me wouldn't have deterred me from my course until I myself fell. Only Hank's actions in destroying the Phalanx while my fury distracted them saved me, and us, and the Shi'ar. I did nothing, nothing of value.

I have never felt so utterly useless in my life.

\* \* \*

><p>Rogue is dancing with yet another Shi'ar, this one a woman. Apparently the dance, among the Shi'ar, isn't necessarily about sex- or else their sexual mores are more flexible than ours. Or maybe just moreso than mine. Who knows what sort of baggage I'm dragging around from a past life?<p>

Blood red against snow and frozen ground. Fires consuming the bodies of the unfairly dead. The stench of urine and feces and fear, and death, always death.

So much for a fresh start on a new life.

She's so beautiful. I'm drunk enough that if I look at her, if I watch her dancing, I don't have to see it happening again in my mind's eye, don't have to see the blood-soaked alien bodies and the superimposition of bodies far less alien, familiar, my own kind. My own family. Oh god... no, look at Rogue instead. Green eyes sparkling in the light, reddish-brown hair wild and free, floating in a cloud around her head as she moves to the alien rhythms. Her perfect, long limbs moving with power and grace, strength that can lift a truck or smash in a wall channeled and focused into the power of the dance.

Summer sunlight and the scent of running water and new-mown grass, everything bright and beautiful and relaxing about home, taken human form in the flesh of one woman.

I remember our last day on Earth, New York City in a light snowfall, the city alive with uncharacteristic brightness. The Christmas season. Not my holiday, I suspect, but it was hers and the rest of the X-Men's, and it's not as if I had any more than the vaguest sense of what holidays I did hold holy anyway. If any of them. There doesn't seem to have been much Magneto held holy. And I believed I could cast aside that life- not ignore it, no, never deny it, but move on. Become a new person, while still atoning for the sins of the old. Have some measure of happiness, even in a life dedicated to atonement.

I sought to give Rogue magic, then, in the belief that she could accept such a gift from me. The sleigh ride over the top of New York City. A foolish move, and given how our kind are feared, a dangerous one. I wasn't paying attention. I didn't care. And nothing bad came of it, as if just once the universe was looking out for the safety of fools in love. And then I gave her the gift I'd been working on- a way to suppress her mind-stealing powers and not the rest of it, a way to let her touch without crippling her.

And I kissed her.

It was the first time I touched her, within my memory. It was very likely the last.

When the Phalanx had tried to consume us all, when she was dying, the words she thought would be her last were to choke out that she loved Remy.

Maybe I'm not drunk enough after all.

\* \* \*

><p>When we return to Earth, she says. When we return, she'll tell me everything I want- no, need- to know about my past life. Not that I don't already know more than I really want to. Pain inflicted, suffering forced on those I now would call friends, and my own children, and Rogue herself. Madness. A life lived in pain, pushed beyond sanity by horrors no man could bear. And now this, a fragment of memory of those horrors.<p>

If this is only the smallest portion of what lived behind Magneto's eyes, no wonder he went mad.

I don't want to know anymore. I fear the return of the memories, fear they will do to me what they did to him, and then I will be him, and any hope I might have had to accomplish something good in my life, any hope for the salvation of my soul, will be extinguished forever. But I can't fight that through ignorance, either. If I were to know what I have been, all that I have been, perhaps I can find some way to tie that to what I am now, and take from that a path to what I want to become. Because I am not, yet, what I want to be. I was useless in that battle, useless when the Phalanx took me out, useless when we first fell into space and Rogue told me to shut up and let the professionals handle it. I want- I need- to be powerful, effective, or how can I be of use, how can I pay back the world and

my teammates for the crimes I have committed if I cannot do anything at all? But the route to what I want is fraught with perils, when any wrong turn and I might find myself staring into the mirror at Magneto. I must know how he came to that place, so I can find another path, so I can take his power and his skill without taking on his madness as well.

And I cannot imagine that it could be a path that allows for bright things, that allows for the foolishness of a young man in love.

Horrors are burnt behind my eyes. If I loved her- if she let me love her- one slip and those horrors would be burnt behind those bright green orbs as well, dulling the sunlight in them. And even if I didn't slip, even if we found the magic solution and she never ever absorbed me, still I could never share with her the horrors that haunt me. She is too good, too bright for that. She should never have her brightness dimmed by the darkness of what I know.

I thought I could have my innocence back, that I could atone for sins without ever letting myself know what they were or why I committed them. I thought I could bask in that bright sunlight and never threaten it with cold winter's darkness. The thoughts of a boy, of a fool. My quest for redemption can't possibly lead into her arms. I cannot risk hurting her, I cannot deserve her love.

And she loves Remy anyway.

So, it isn't much of a hardship to make the choice, is it?

\* \* \*

><p>Dance, my love. Dance, and forget, and celebrate with these strange people that answer death with a celebration of life. Dance, and afterward go to your lover, wherever he might be in this place, and share what you can with him. He may be a thief and a rogue, he may have been mistrusted because of who Bishop remembered him to be in a future that will never happen now, but whatever darkness he has behind his eyes, it can't be the equal to mine. He won't darken your brightness, as I inevitably would.<p>

Tomorrow I will tell you that I understand. That I heard you when you said you loved Remy, and I don't wish to stand between the two of you. That I wish only to be your friend, to stand at your side in battle and in peace. And that if he ever breaks your heart, I'll kill him.

Tonight, I will sit alone, with a glass in my hand, and watch you dance.

In my mind I set you free, without ever having had you in the first place. The alien music swirls around you, alien voices a susurrations all around as they dance to prove that they are alive.

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><p><em>For updates and notes about my work, visit my Livejournal at alara-r dot livejournal dot com. (Fanfiction dot net strips links, so I have to write it out like that.)<em>

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